# THEY LIVED LIKE THIS IN SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLAND

Marie Neurath & Muriel Turner

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of the Isotype Institute

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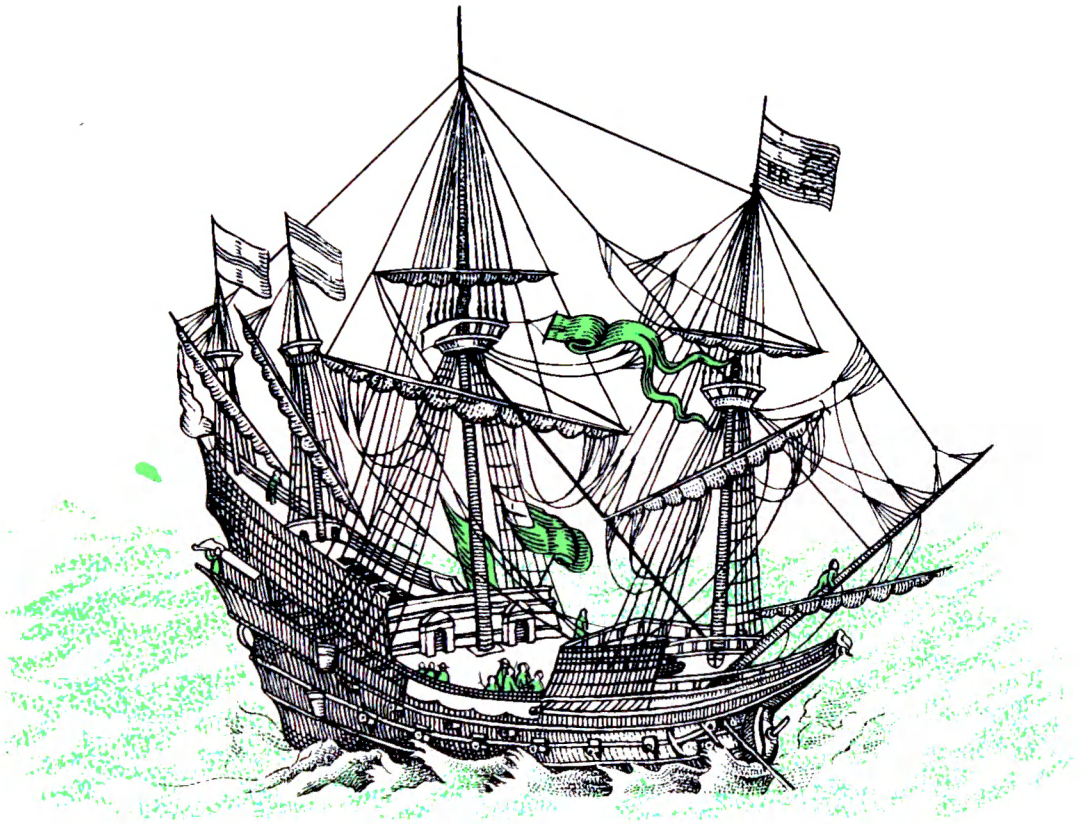
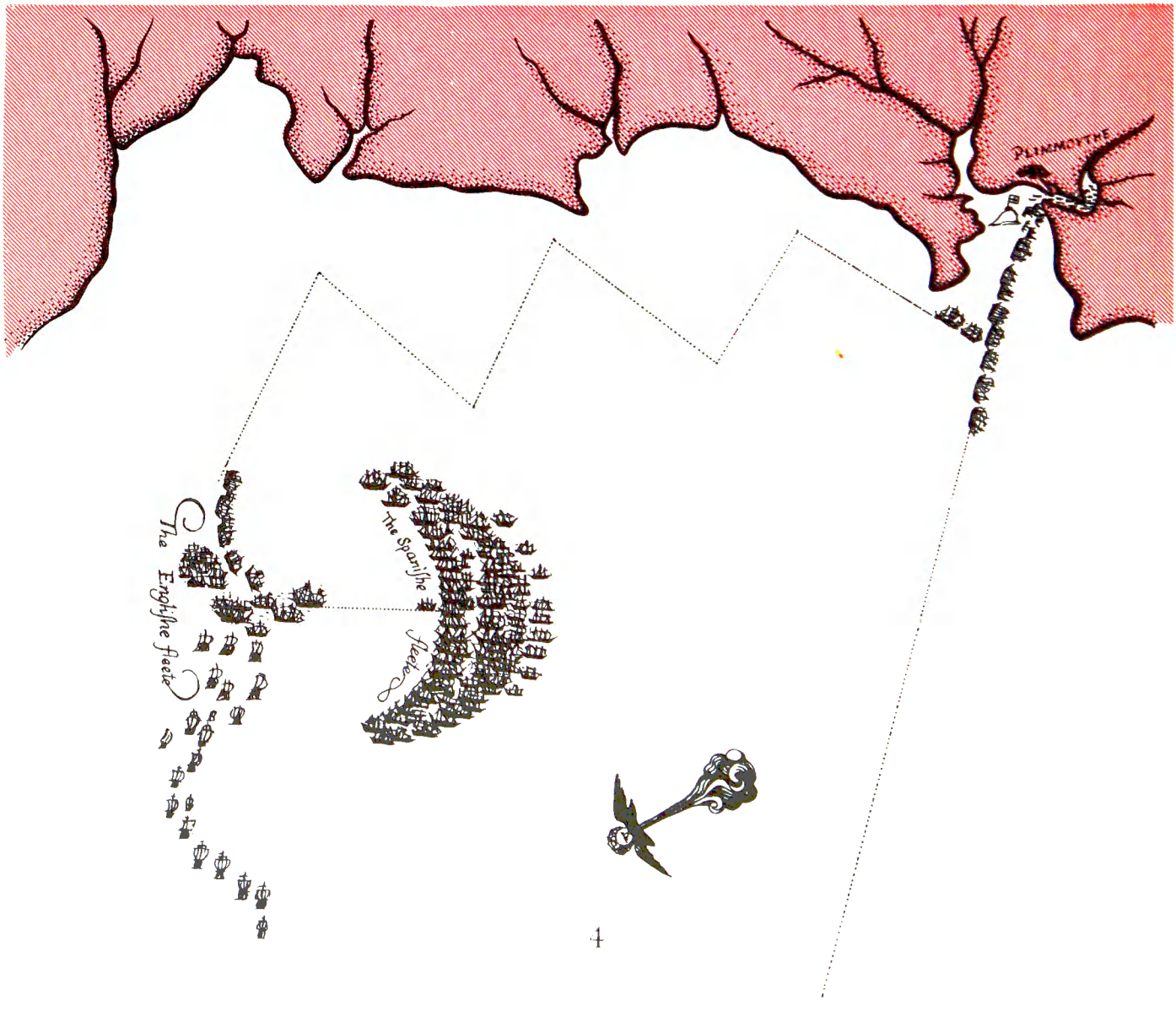
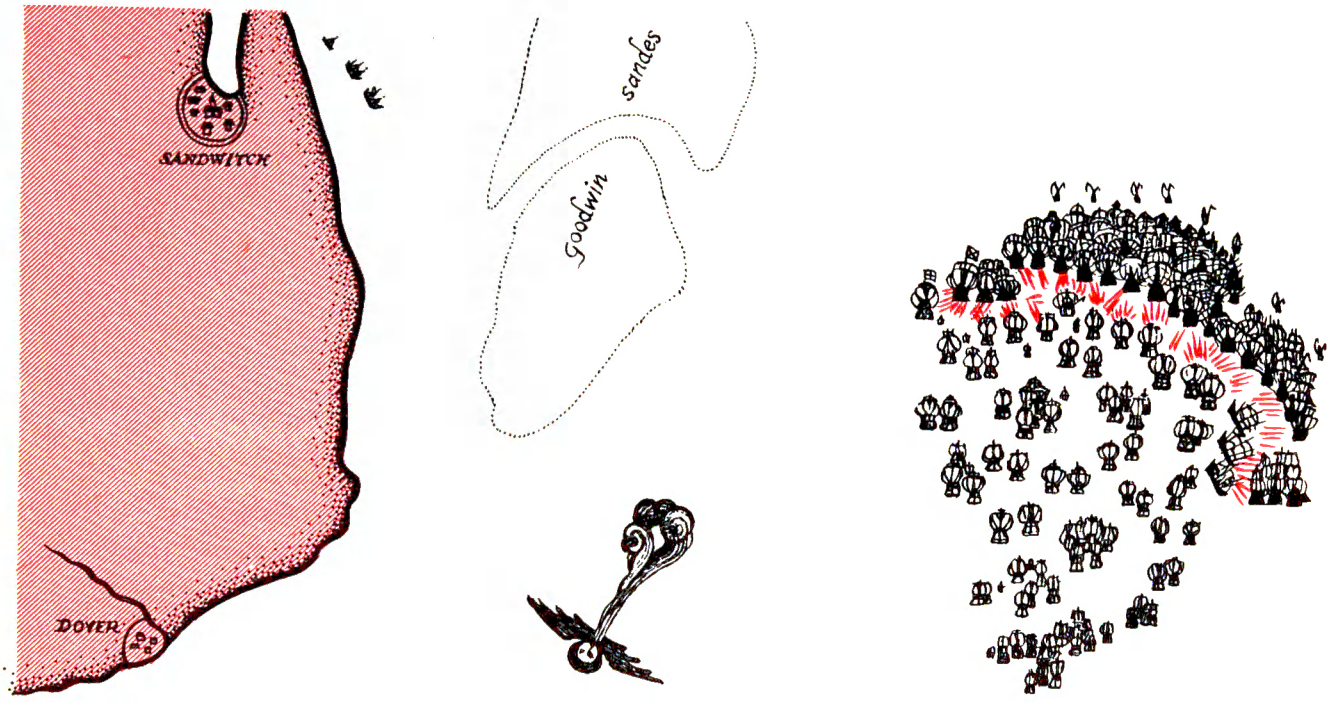
# SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLAND



At the time when Shakespeare was born, Elizabeth I was Queen of England. Under the Tudors, the royal family to which she belonged, the country grew in wealth and power. English shipyards provided the merchants with strong ships, able to sail in heavy seas, and when trade with nearby countries was cut off by war they journeyed to more distant lands. The battleships, too, were improved. Formerly they had carried soldiers, who swarmed aboard to fight the enemy while the two ships with their high castles grappled with one another. Now English ships were lower and swifter and relied on guns that fired from a distance, instead of hand to hand fighting. Rows of gun barrels can be seen on the side of this ship.

At that time Spain was the strongest and richest nation in the world. She had conquered land in America, and her sailors brought back ship-loads of gold and silver. English sailors attacked and plundered these Spanish ships. The two countries also had religious differences, which led to war. Queen Elizabeth's father had broken away from the Pope in Rome, and Spain was the Pope's strongest supporter, fighting Protestant movements in every country. Queen Elizabeth, on the other hand, was the hope of the Protestants fleeing from persecution.






Spain sent her Armada, a great fleet of high ships, against England. These maps show two stages of the battle. When the Armada approached from the southwest, the English ships left Plymouth harbour to meet it. A strong wind was blowing, and it drove the Spanish off their course. On the second map English ships can be seen firing. The Spanish ships that escaped were blown north where they were destroyed on the rocks. The threat of invasion was over. The English were free to follow their own way of religious and political life.

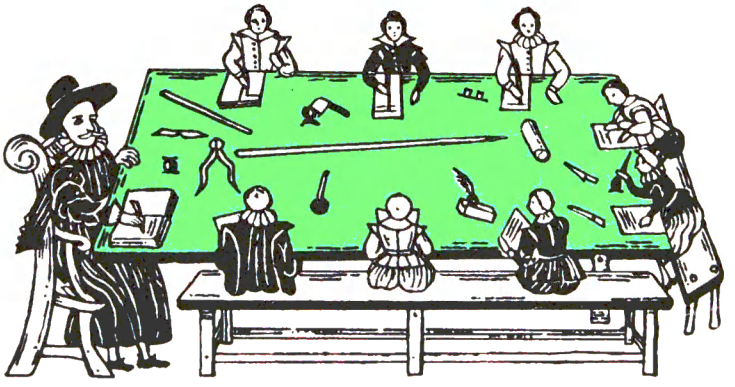
Elizabeth's father, King Henry VIII, had declared that the ruler of England was also its religious head. He dealt harshly with the Roman Catholics who did not obey him, closing the monasteries and taking their land. Mary Tudor, who became Queen before Elizabeth, obeyed the Pope and made laws against the Protestants. Elizabeth was more tolerant. She expected every one to go to Anglican church services on Sundays, but she did not forbid other beliefs until they became dangerous to her government.

The Protestant rulers of England did not change religion as much as the reformers Calvin and Luther did in Europe. But services became simpler, held in English, with hymns and psalms sung to easy tunes. Worshippers gathered around a table instead of an altar to take holy communion, as the picture above shows.

At home the family gathered for prayers and readings from the Bible.

Many of the church schools had been closed, and children went to little village schools, or learned their first lessons at home, often from the family Bible. A group of children might gather under a tutor, at a manor house.

These children have a compass and a ruler. Perhaps they are studying geometry.



For older boys the merchants and other patrons built new grammar schools, some of which still survive. Girls studied at home, and many were well educated.

More books were now available because they were no longer written by hand, but were printed. For many years woodcuts had been used to print pictures, but now the letters of the alphabet were cut in separate pieces of hard wood, which could be put together to make words and sentences. Whole books were printed in this way.

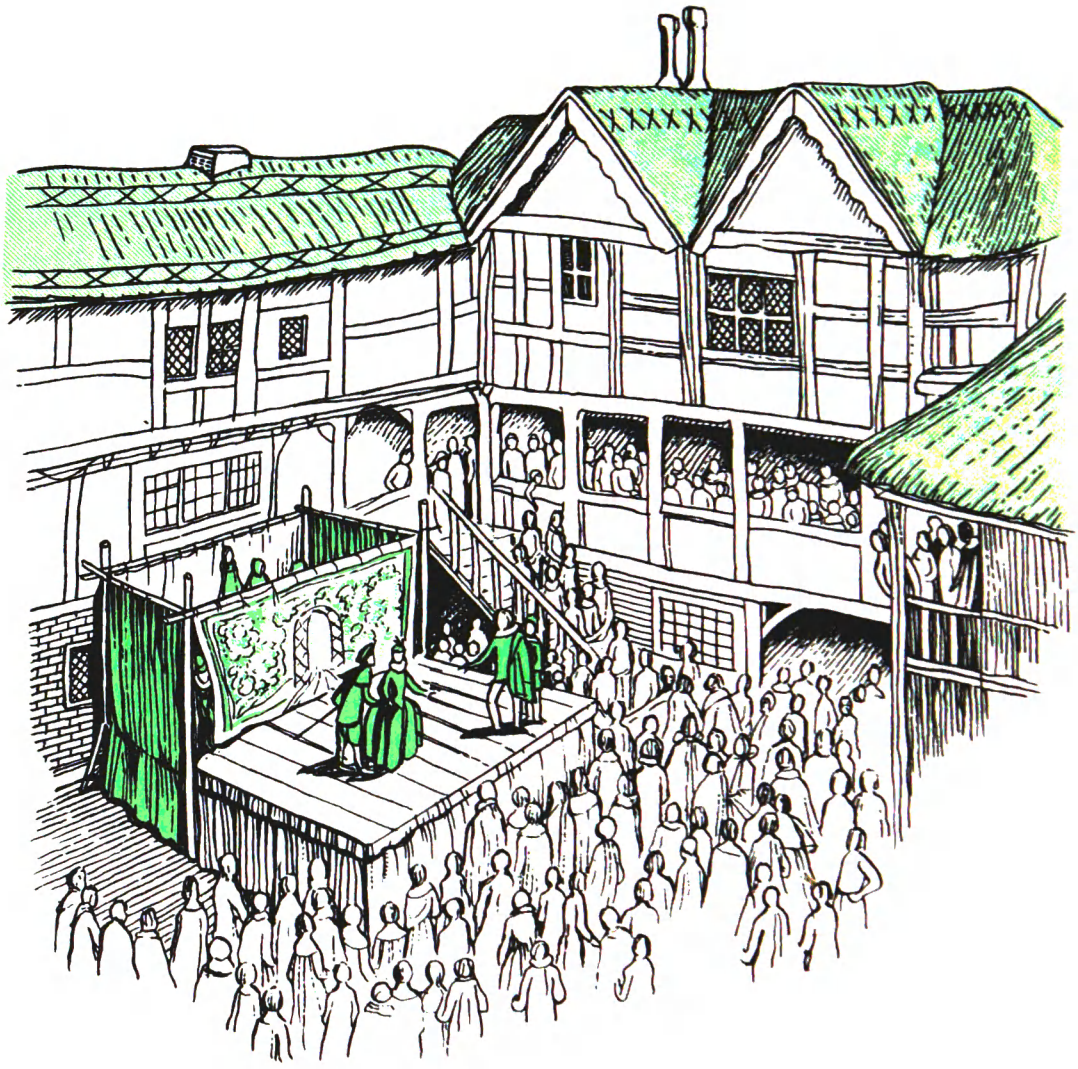
This picture shows printers at work. In the background there are men with boxes of type. In the foreground two heaps of paper can be seen, one still white, the other with lines of printing. One of the men at the printing press is picking up a printed sheet, the other is putting ink on the type, which will be covered with a sheet of paper and put under the press.

The art of printing had spread to all countries from a town in Germany. The first English printer had been William Caxton. This picture shows him presenting a book to a princess.

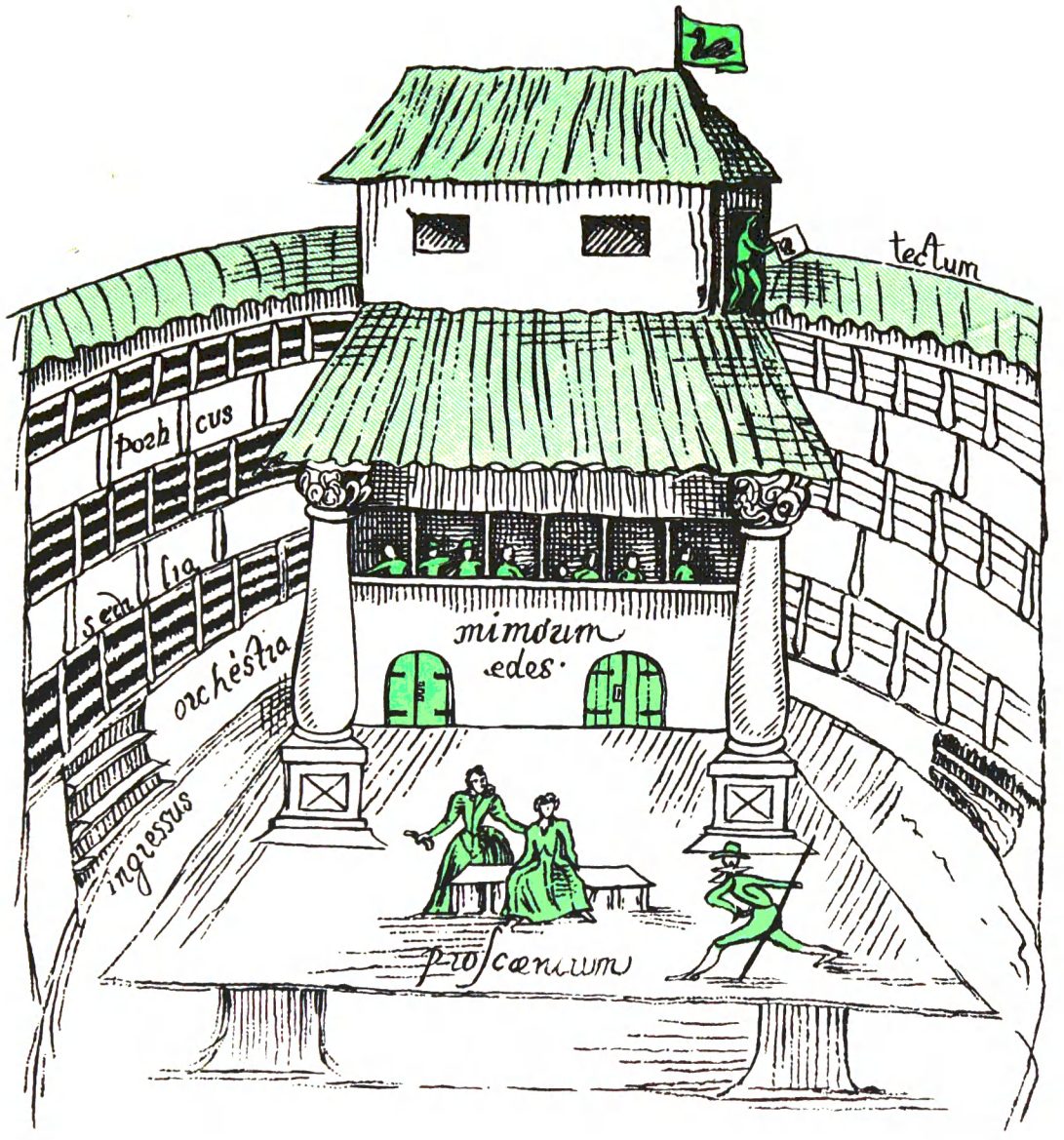
The initials W and C can be recognised in his printer's mark:

Wooden type, which wore out quickly, was later replaced by metal. Casting type became an important craft. Woodcut illustrations, too, were replaced by engravings. Many of the pictures in this book are taken from woodcuts and engravings of the time.

Among these early books the Bible was the most popular. It was printed both in Latin and in translations. The English language became richer when people used it in reading and writing as well as everyday speech. This new skill showed itself in poetry and drama. Great works were produced, above all by Shakespeare himself.

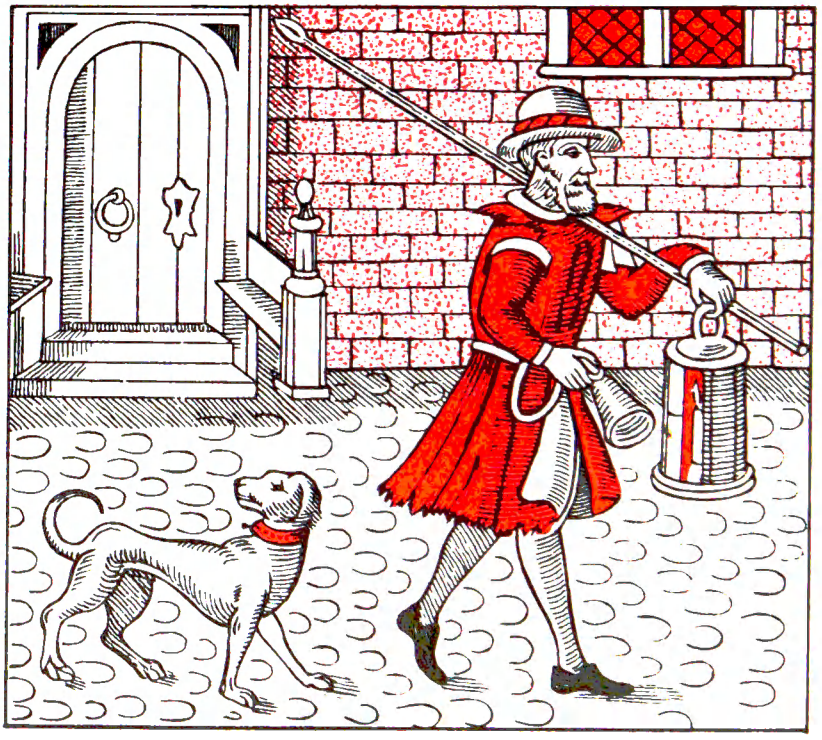


Drama was already popular. Crowds gathered to watch the plays, which at first were performed at the inns. The actors used the inn-yard and the audience could watch from the open galleries surrounding it in several stories. The early theatres were built like the inn-yards. Rings where bear or bull baiting took place were similar to theatres and could easily be changed from one use to the other.

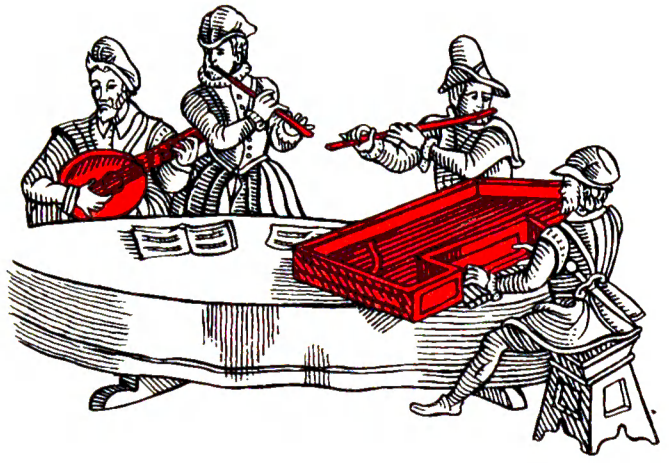



The play was performed on a bare stage like this. The stage had no roof, and the ground where most of the people stood was also open to the sky. Only the back of the stage and the surrounding galleries were covered. The actors learned their parts from handwritten sheets. Then, if the public liked the play, a printer might agree to print it. Shakespeare's plays were copied down and printed, one by one.

The Queen loved the theatre and protected the actors. She often called them to perform before the Court, and even to accompany her out of London. The companies of players relied on the Queen and noble patrons because they were not popular with the merchants who ruled the City. The Mayor and Councillors did not approve of the performances, which kept men from their daytime work. Finally the Companies built theatres across the river, where the City merchants had no power.

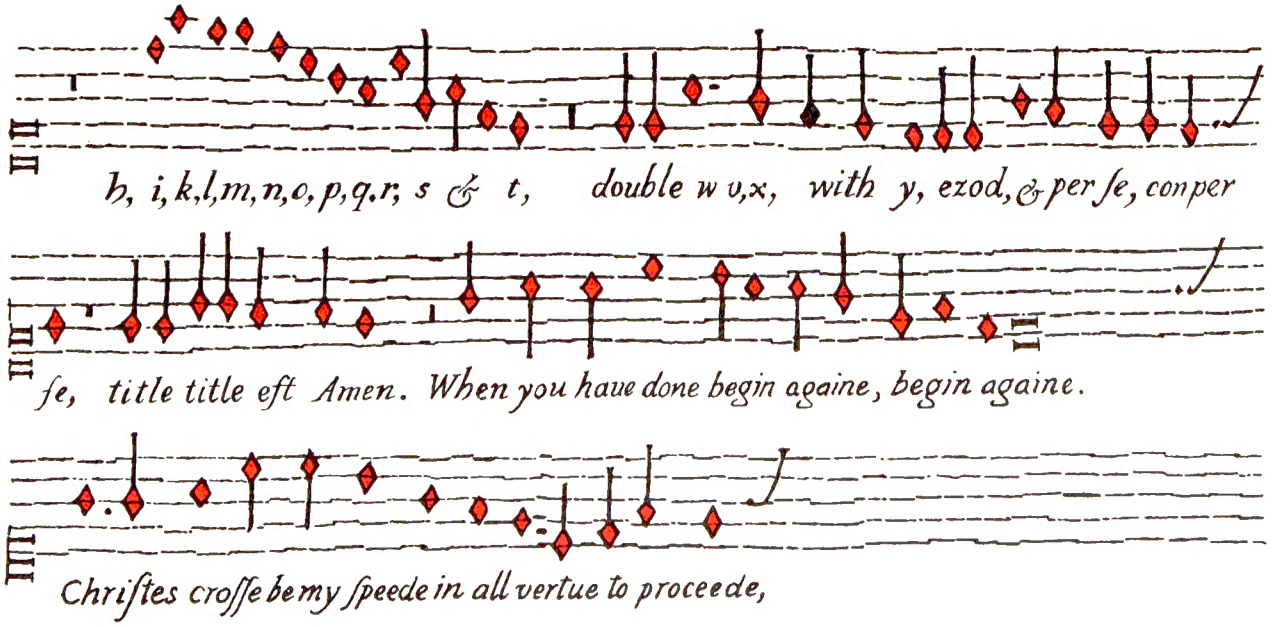


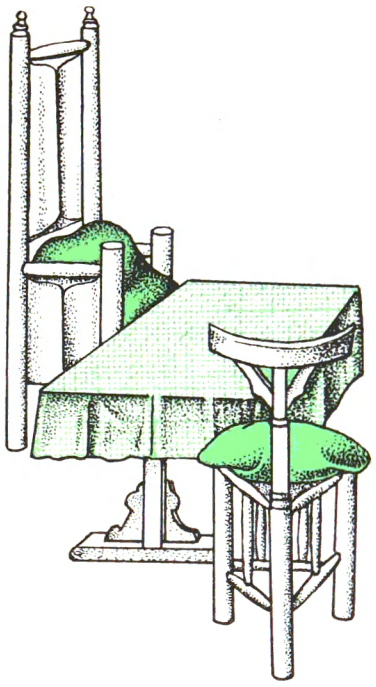
Performances could not be given at night because there were no lights, and the streets were dark and dangerous. In every town a bellringer carrying his lantern, walked the streets, calling out the hours and keeping watch on the houses.



Music enlivened the long evenings in the houses of gentlemen and rich merchants. This young man is playing the virginal, a kind of early piano. Lutes and violins were also popular.

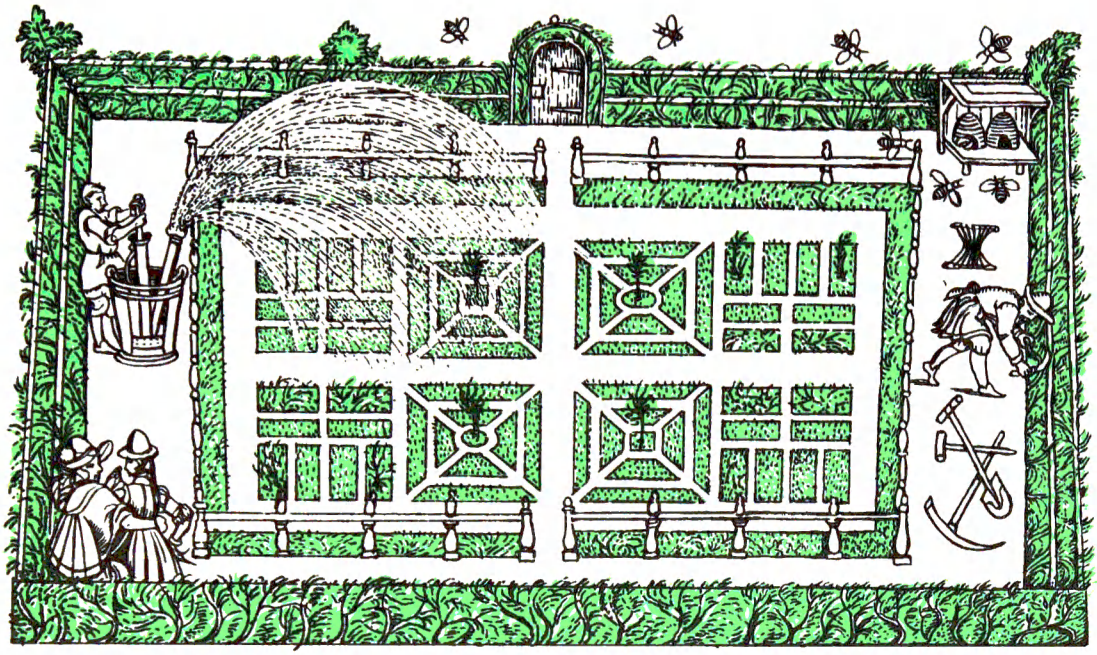
The family and guests joined in singing madrigals and part songs. These were so popular that many books of songs were printed. This little song taught children the letters of the alphabet.


II
h, i,k,l,m,n,o,p,q,r; s & t, double w v,x, with y, ezod,& per ſe, conper
III
ſe, title title eft Amen. When you haue done begin againe, begin againe.
IIII
Chriſtes croſſe be my ſpeede in all vertue to proceede,

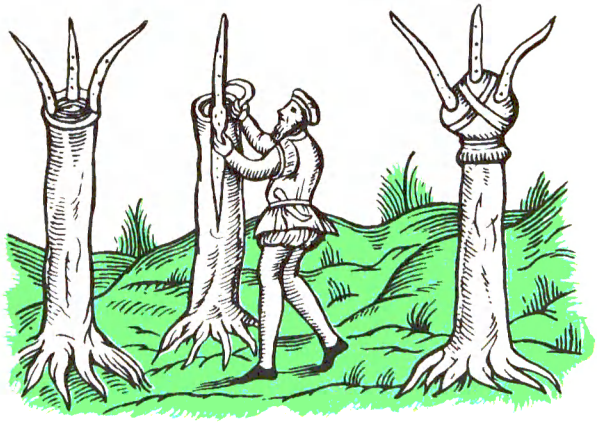


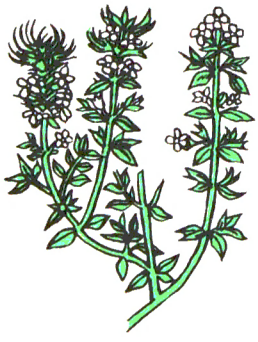
Many people now lived more comfortably in houses with large glass windows and heavy, carved oak furniture.
Most important were four-poster beds with their expensive hangings, often embroidered by hand.

Cushions were used on the hard chairs and benches.
The ladies embroidered cushion covers and cloths which they laid over the tables and chests.
Elaborate dresses were made by skilled embroiderers.



Ornamental gardens were laid out to enhance the house. Even small gardens were formally planned. Here we see gardeners grafting trees. There was great interest in flowers, and new varieties were brought from countries as far away as China and Japan.

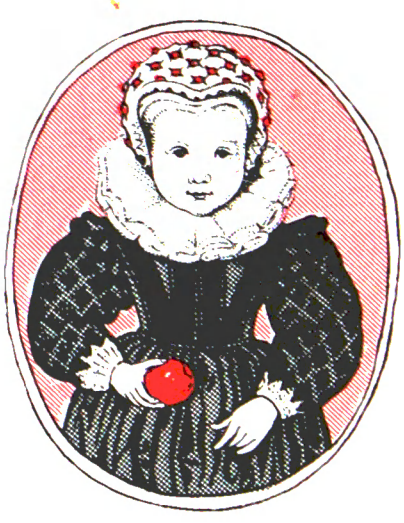


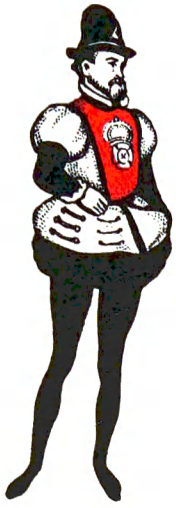


Flowers and fruit served as designs for embroidery. Artists also made drawings of trees and flowers for books about gardening.

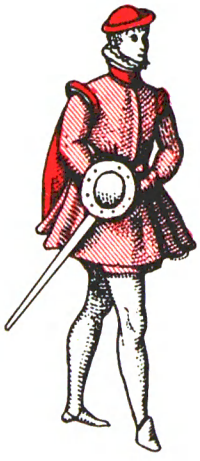
Here is a painter at work. His desk gets light from the window. In his hand he is holding spectacles, a new invention at this time. Elizabethan painters needed good sight to make the delicate paintings for which they became famous.

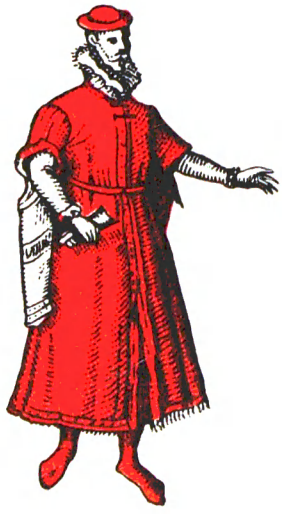
Little portraits called miniatures were worn in jewelled lockets. This one, which in reality is no bigger than the drawing, shows a four-year-old girl dressed like a lady with a folded lace ruff and wide embroidered sleeves.





Fashions changed from time to time, although not as quickly as today. Detailed handwork went into the making of each garment. Silks and velvets were embroidered with jewels and rich thread. Gentlemen as well as ladies wore fine cloth, lace, and high starched ruffs. The Court in London was the centre of fashion.

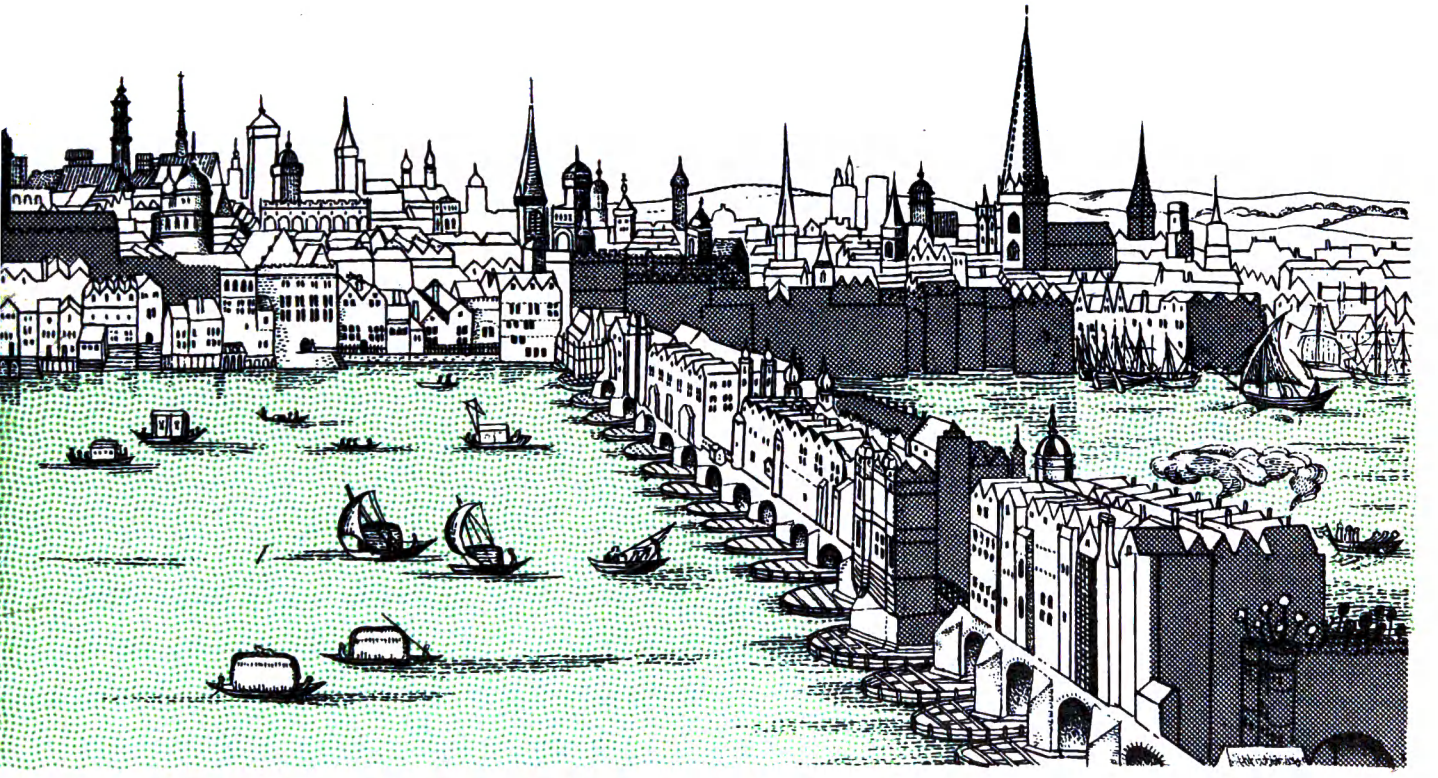




London was now the largest town in Europe – perhaps in the world. Walls built on the Old Roman foundations enclosed the City, where the powerful merchants, who controlled the trade of all England, had their homes. Many had their own landing places on the Thames, beside the trading wharfs.

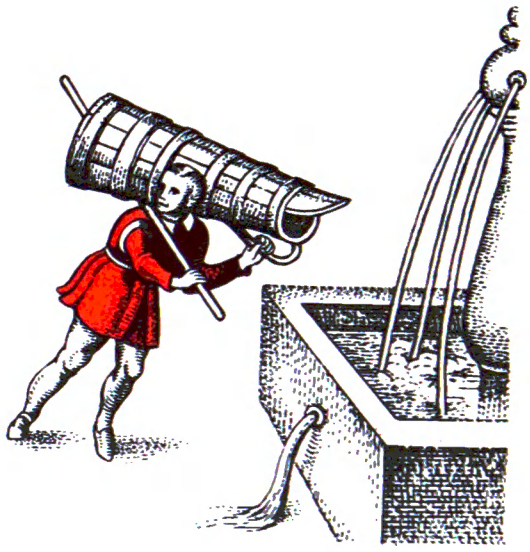
The Thames was London's main highway, with craft of all kinds carrying passengers and goods. The streets were narrow, unpaved and littered with rubbish, and travellers found it easiest to sail down the river.

They were ferried across from bank to bank. London Bridge was the only other way over the river. Its strong foundations, built to withstand tides as well as the river currents, provided firm building ground and many houses huddled together on the bridge. It also carried one of the gates to the City.

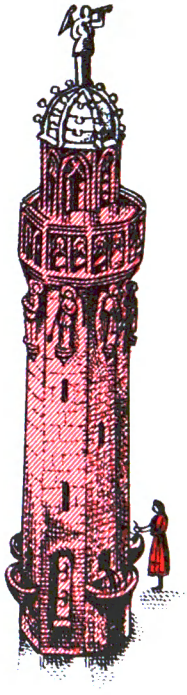


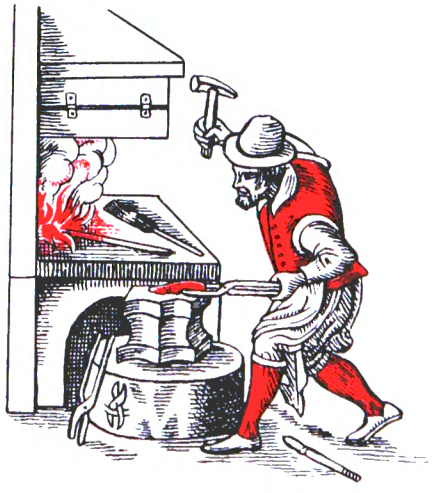
In London, as in many smaller towns, the leading merchants who took charge of public affairs made health rules, designed to keep the streets clean. But there was no sanitation, waste was thrown into the rivers. Frequent plagues broke out.

London had one advantage. Fresh water was piped into public fountains from the hills to the north. Water carriers took it from there to the houses in large wooden tankards.



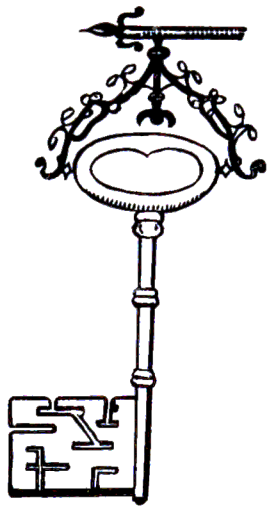
One of these fountains was in a road near St. Paul's Cathedral. Shops lined the street, and markets were held there.



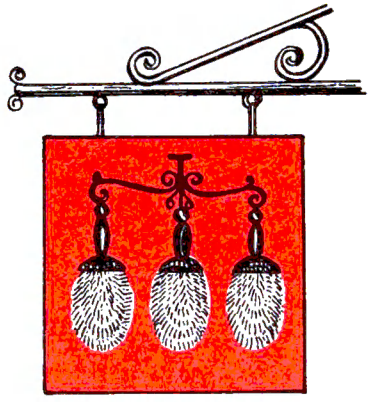


In the towns lived many craftsmen cobblers and furriers, goldsmiths and blacksmiths. Their wages and prices were controlled by the master craftsmen. Apprentices had to study under a master for years.

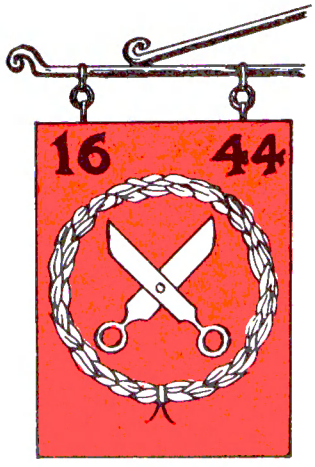
Signs hanging out of the houses showed where the various craftsmen lived. Most of them worked in the house where they lived and the apprentices shared the family life.



Besides the locksmiths, brushmakers, clothmakers, and tailors whose signs you see here there were people who provided food, like the bakers, butchers, and grocers.

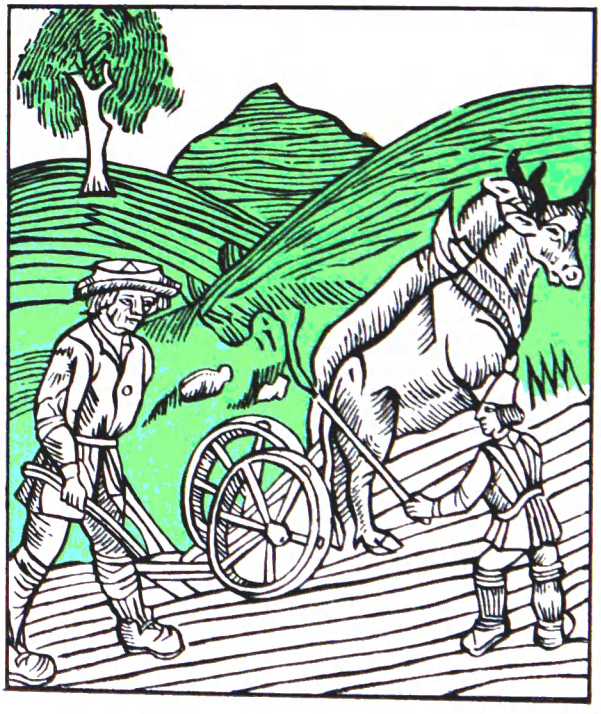


Spinning and weaving were mostly done in the villages. The merchants supplied the material and took away the finished work. But in slack times they stopped giving out work and people went hungry.
Poor Laws were made for the first time. Each parish had to keep stocks of wool or flax for unemployed people to work on.



Farm workers too were often in need. Some had cottages and a piece of land, but most were paid wages and had to leave the farm if there was no work for them. The great landowners preferred to rent out farms to yeomen who worked for themselves. Here a tenant is paying his rent in money. Some of these yeomen farmers became rich enough to buy land and set up as gentlemen.

Books on farming and animal care were popular. Most people, even the townsmen, still worked the fields. This woodcut shows an ox-drawn plough.



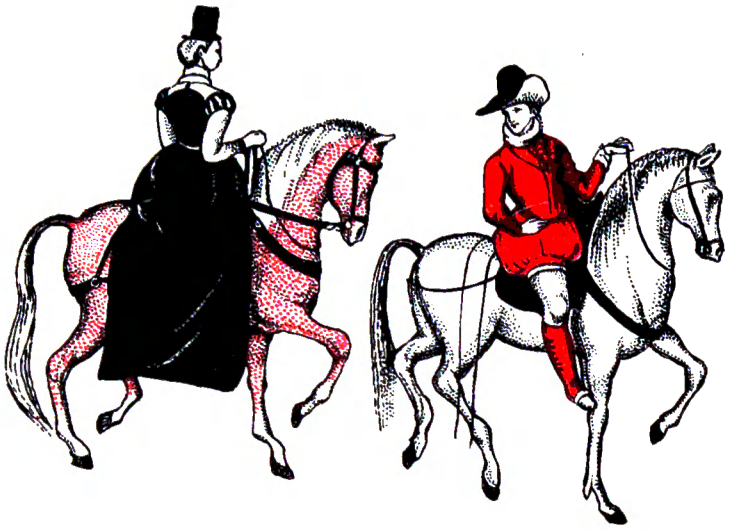
Successful farmers and merchants bought land and built manor houses. They gave up work and lived as country gentlemen. Shakespeare himself, although he did not retire, bought property near his old home at Stratford-on-Avon. His father, who was a prosperous citizen, became a gentleman when the Queen granted him a coat of arms.

The pleasures of life on a manor are shown in this scene from the embroidered border of a table cover.

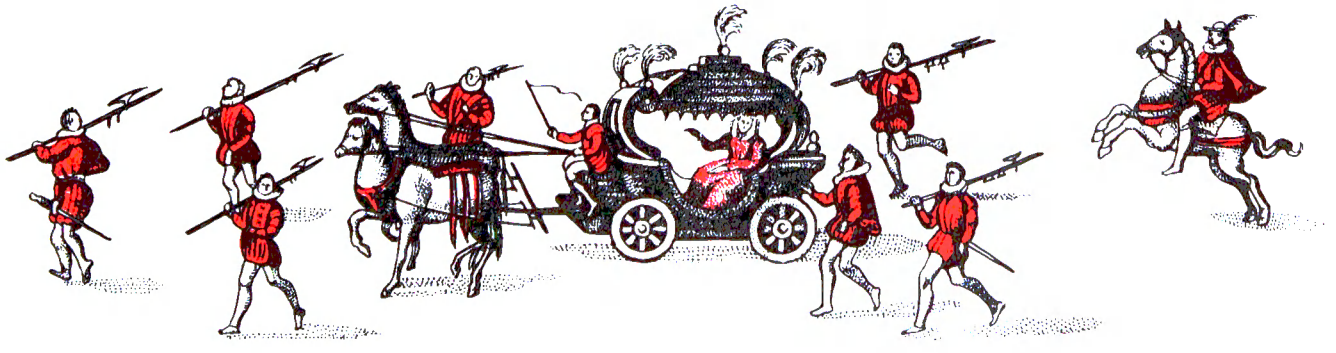
The nobility had changed under the Tudor kings. Old families lost their importance and new peers were created who championed the cause of the king. They were privileged courtiers and held high government posts.
Under Elizabeth, life at Court was elegant and pleasure-loving. Here the Queen is seen at a royal picnic.

The same picture was used for her successor King James by changing the royal figure.

Servants are unloading great joints of meat. At that time the English were known in Europe for their well-stocked tables and huge meals. Even poorer people ate well.



The Queen was well loved. She travelled around the country each summer to see that her laws were being obeyed, and to meet her people. Like everyone else she went on horseback on a long journey, for the roads were bad, and the coaches had no springs. For short distances litters were often used. On special occasions the Queen went by a ceremonial coach.

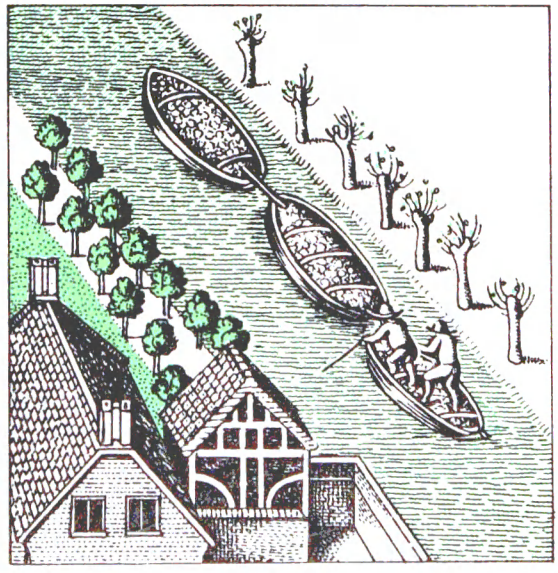


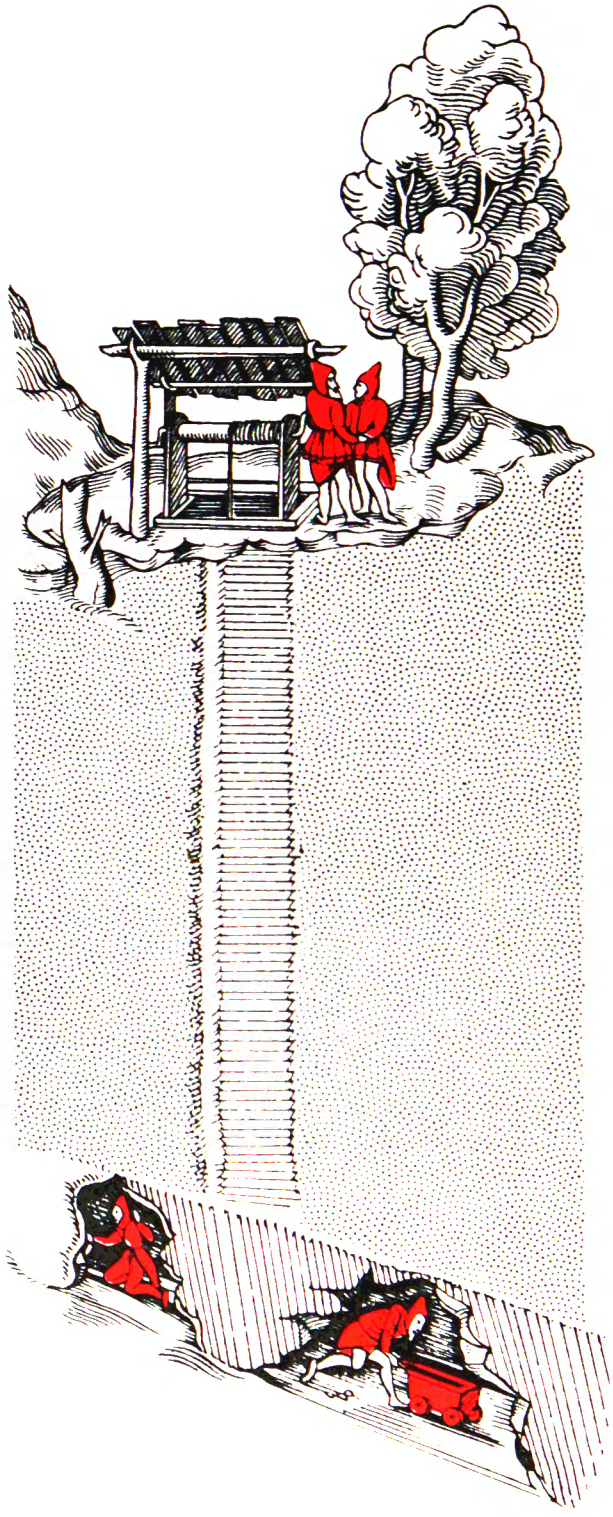
On her journeys the Queen expected to be entertained with all her court in the houses of the local nobility. She did not hesitate to complain if they did not please her, and great mansions were built for her comfort. Royalty would repay the cost by the grant of new lands or favours, such as the sole right to sell sweet wine, or tin from the Cornish mines, or to print Bibles. The Queen could ruin a courtier who displeased her.

Ordinary people could spend the night at an inn, where they would find a bed, food, and cheerful company, as shown in the picture. But they had to take care when they continued their journey, because robbers waylaid rich travellers whom they had seen at an inn.

Peasant women rode to market with their goods. Sometimes a wife went seated behind her husband on his horse. Normally travellers used their own horses, but they could also ride "post-haste" by hiring horses and changing them at stages along the main roads.
Horses were kept ready for the royal messengers in this way. Wherever the Queen was, at one of her palaces or on an official journey, she was informed of all important news.

Heavy goods that had to be carried long distances, usually went by water. Ships took them down rivers and canals or along the coast.





Metals were mined in many places, sometimes by farm workers on the manor. Here the workers are digging near the surface. A diviner is with them. Where the cleft stick in his hands dips down they will begin to dig.

Deep mines were also opened. This picture shows a shaft and a gallery lined with wood. Loads are being lifted by a windlass worked by hand. Later, animals were used for this work.

Wood was used for mines and for processing the metal ore. Charcoal which gave stronger heat was needed for smelting iron. In the forests charcoal burners piled up wood and covered it with turf which allowed in only a little air, so that the wood was partly burned in a slow fire.

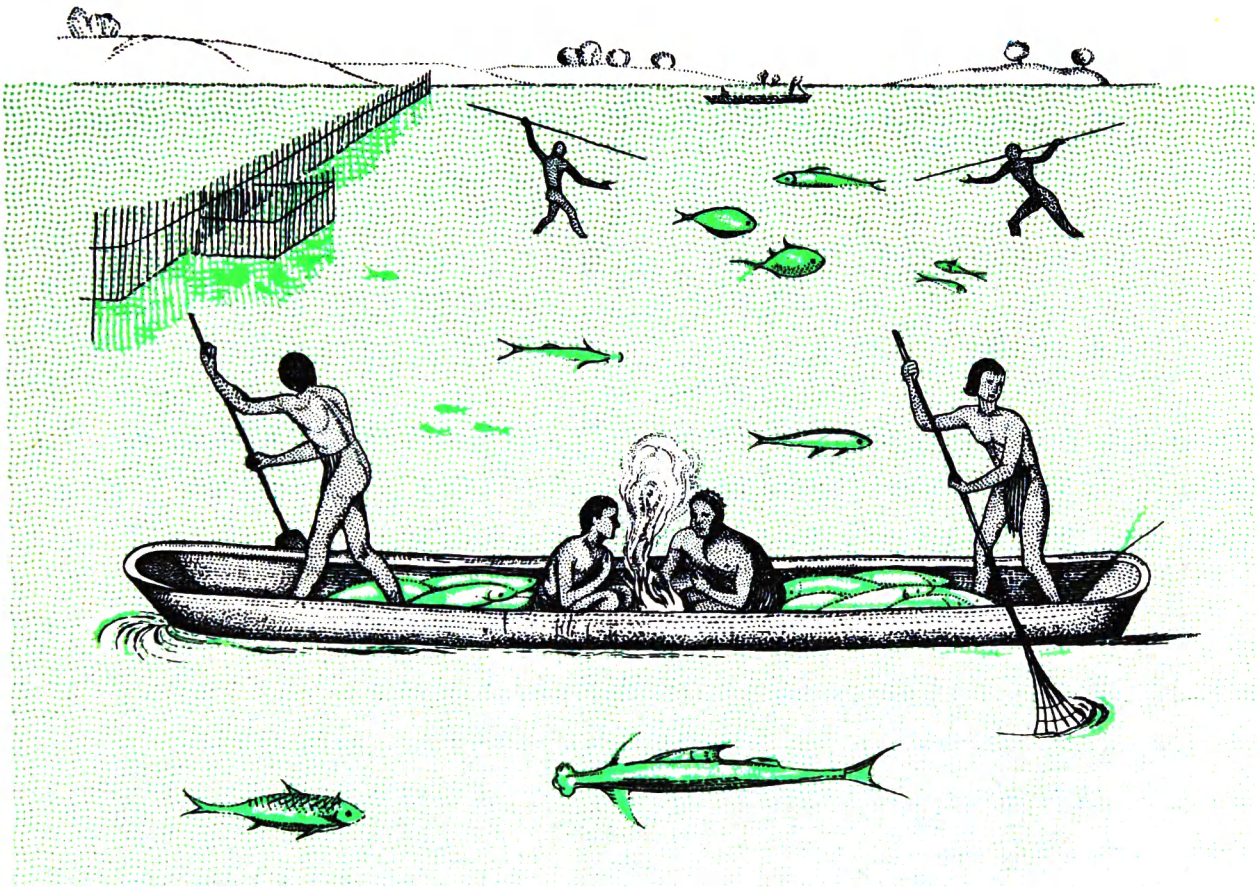
As the trees were cut down and not replaced, forests disappeared and wood became scarce. People began to use coal. They called it sea coal because it was carried to London by boats which sailed along the coast from Wales or the north-east.

They sailed to South America
and around the globe.
From America they brought
a new plant, the potato.
This picture from a gardening
book shows its leaves and
flowers, its underground roots,
and the tuber that we eat.

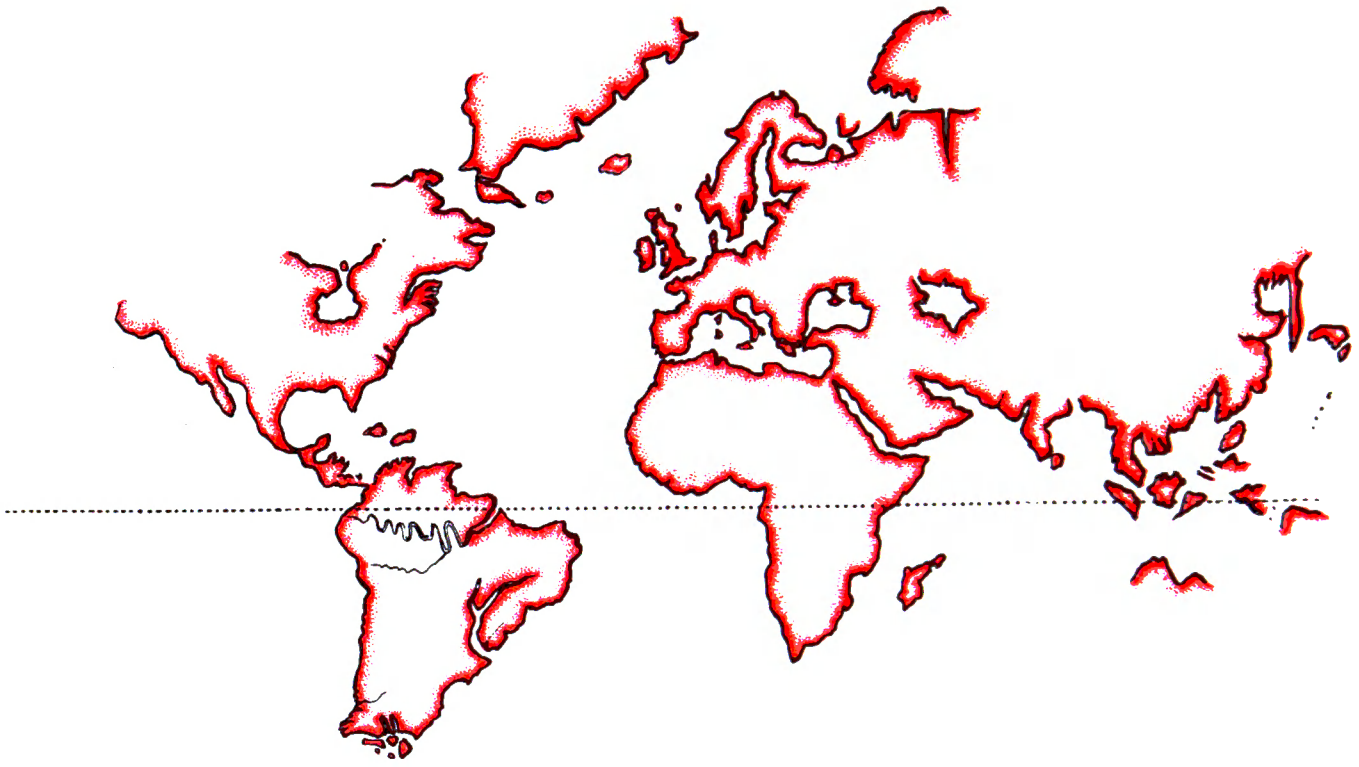
The merchant ships carried
English cloth and metals to
far countries. They reached
Russia by sea, through
Arctic waters, and travelled
inland up the rivers.
They sailed around Africa
to India and brought back
spices, unknown plants,
and strange tales.

Tobacco and the habit
of smoking also came
from America.

It was on the eastern coast of North America, in Virginia, that the English first landed to settle. Here, during Shakespeare's lifetime, they began to found a colony. They made pictures of the land and its people. This one shows how the American Indians fished.



The travellers who discovered new places found different climates, plants, animals and people. They saw that customs other than theirs were possible, and that their own way of life could be changed. Some scholars began to plan better, happier societies which they called Utopias.



By about the year 1600 most of the world's coastlines were known to the sailors. Even the northernmost tips of Australia were sighted – but that they were part of another continent was unknown.

Shakespeare lived to see England and Scotland being ruled by the same King, James I. Spain still controlled most of the newly found lands. England had only a few footholds in America, Africa and India. Yet these were the beginnings of a world empire whose common language was English.

In the centuries that followed, people in many countries studied the poems and plays that were written in England. William Shakespeare, who wrote for the enjoyment of his countrymen, could not have guessed that his plays would be cherished as great literature for centuries all over the world.